

# Creative Writing

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*By Stephen J. Davies*

Learning how to write in English is important for many language learners, particularly those who are studying at colleges and universities. Writing is essentially a creative process and good writers must learn to communicate their ideas clearly to an unseen audience. This takes a lot of practice. However, L2 language learners have traditionally learned to write by completing fill-in-the-blanks exercises which focus on accuracy rather than on the composing process. Creative writing, on the other hand, gives learners practice in composing and complements more traditional approaches.

Although the ability to produce error-free writing is desirable, this article describes activities that focus on communication and self-expression. Learners will be encouraged to write if writing tasks motivate them and keep them interested.

## Writing Short Narratives

First, here is a way of writing short collaborative narratives that can be finished in one lesson. To prepare, I get one sheet of paper for each student and at the top of each sheet I write an opening sentence. I mix traditional openers like, "Once upon a time an old man and an old woman were living together," with action style beginnings such as, "I woke at dawn and immediately saw the gun in her hand." More bizarre opening lines are also good, e.g., "Julie was the loneliest carrot in the vegetable garden." Remember to keep things in the realm of action; the main point is for the students to be able to continue the story easily.

When I've finished writing the opening sentences, I give the students a single sheet of paper each and tell them to read the sentence that I've written and then to write a sentence of their own to continue the narrative. When they've done this, they pass the paper to another student who will write one more sentence before passing it on. The students soon get absorbed in writing the narratives which often start to take unexpected twists and turns: The lonely carrot that I mentioned earlier was unhappy because of a failed relationship with another vegetable. She soon fell in love with the gardener, married, and had some interesting children.

When the students have finished, I collect the narratives and check that they are understandable. Then in the next lesson, I read the narratives aloud; I've always found that the students get really absorbed in listening to their own writing.

## Narratives Based on Pictures of People

Pictures are a good starting point for writing narratives. One method that I use, adapted from Sion (1985), is to collect about twenty photographs of people of different ages from various

magazines. I then tape these to the blackboard and tell the students that they should choose a picture of one person and try to write a narrative imagining that they are that person. They have to concentrate on details like job, hobbies, whether single or married, children, and so on. I also tell them to avoid describing the person's physical appearance and to use first person singular pronouns throughout.

After they have finished writing they take reading their imaginary autobiographical narratives out loud while the other students have to look at the blackboard and guess which of the people is "talking." As there is no description of physical features, the students have to listen closely to try and identify the right person. Using the first person helps to make the narratives sound authentic and convincing.

This activity emphasises the importance of writing as communication because any lack of clarity means that the listeners will not be able to recognize the "speaker." It combines writing and listening. To make the second stage more exciting it's also possible to divide the students into teams and award points for each person correctly identified.

## **Spontaneous Prose**

The term "spontaneous prose" was first used by the writer Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) to describe his own writing. I'm using it here to refer to an activity where participants write without using any visual model of writing to guide them; instead, they begin writing after listening to music and poetry. The idea is to try and induce a specific mood and then to use this as a stimulus; the emphasis is on free expression.

I've used this technique as part of a writing program for Japanese English teachers. At one session we listened to a recording of a Langston Hughes poem and some mellow jazz; as the music continued in the background we began our writing. One of the teachers wrote this:

It's raining outside. It's cold. It's late afternoon. Maybe rain will turn to snow before dark. An old lady is standing by the window. She feels melancholic without knowing the reason. She tries to remember happy memories which will make her forget her melancholic mood. She succeeds in remembering them.

She was ambitious in her younger dreams. She had many dreams. She believed dreams would come true if only she made the effort. But life is not so simple as she imagined when she was young and ignorant of the real world. She was disappointed and exhausted many times. Gradually she forgot her dreams and came to compromise with her situation as it was. She tried hard to avoid experiences and live safely rather than hazard a venture to get something she really wanted. Time passed by calmly until recently.

But in these days, she doubts if her way of life is really right, of course she is not unhappy, she has a nice husband and two sons. But she sometimes feels there is a vacant space in her mind. She can't get rid of such feelings. Now she gets to know the reason why she gets to feel so.

She realises that it's because she didn't struggle with the hardships of the real world. She notices that hardships are not what she should run away from but what she must overcome and that is the only way to realize happiness in her mind. Therefore she makes up her mind never to run away from risks from now on. She thinks it may be a bit late for her to accomplish something fully. She, however, will not care whether she is successful or not. What she wants now is only to do her best in every situation until death calls on her some day.

As a follow-up activity, the students read each other's work and commented on it. As for the writing that I've cited, we focused on words and phrases that conveyed the feeling of sadness. Our purpose was to be encouraging and supportive; we looked for things to praise and avoided any direct comment on irregularities of syntax and spelling.

In another session we took a stroll around a nearby bamboo forest with notebooks in hand. We made a note of all our sensory experiences: sights, sounds, smells, etc. Then we returned to the classroom for an impressionistic writing session.

## Poetry

Writing poetry can appear to be a difficult task for students who may have struggled to understand English classics. Traditional poetry is often tightly structured and sometimes requires a knowledge of poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. In addition, some students feel that poetry is too "intimate" and requires them to disclose personal feelings. Boys may find poetry rather feminine. Some students may have had experience writing poetry in L1.

To deal with these concerns, I first explain about free verse. Poetry doesn't always have to be organized into iambic pentameter or rhyme and scan perfectly. In fact, any short, simple piece of self-expression can be called "poetry" as long as it is organized visually into the shape of a poem. Also, poetry can be about anything; just about any topic is suitable. Motorbikes are as good as flowers.

There may still be a reluctance to get started. To get things moving, I have tried reading my poems to the class. I've also written a couple of verses in Japanese and read these out to amuse the students and let them know that grammatical accuracy is not the target.

Here are two poems written by Japanese high school students:

LIFE OF MOSQUITO Sky is big and I'm small People hate me Why ? I fly as strongly as I can  
Seeking for blood

I AM THE WIND I am the wind I take your thoughts away I am the wind I take your secrets  
away I am the wind I take your troubles away I am the wind I am the wind to change your future

Here are two minimal Haiku style poems written by Japanese teachers:

Under the cherry tree the warm breeze brought many sounds  
In the bamboo forest I startled a butterfly a flash of colour!

The procedure I've suggested involves getting the students to write poetry without first giving them any specific written examples. The reason for this is that some students feel that model poems are "superior" writing and may try to imitate them without thinking for themselves. In general though, I've found that they are capable of writing interesting poetry when they are free from worry about whether their English is "good." It has been easier for them to write their own poems than to have them interpret poetry written by someone else. This is because interpretation can only be done after translating. Some poems have difficult vocabulary, unusual word order, and use various poetical devices that may make accurate translation difficult.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued in favour of free creative writing activities with a minimum of teacher control. For more structured writing activities see Carroll (1992), Khan (1993) and Rogers (1996). Changes in recent years have brought more attention to the composing process. Writing has come to be seen as a process of exploration and an opportunity for learners to develop confidence in using language. In addition, creative writing gives learners a chance to experiment freely with language and helps develop an efficient composing process. This can be further strengthened and used in a wide variety of alternative writing tasks.

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## References

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